

A PHYSICALIST VIEW OF THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST

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My project in this paper is to provide a plausible idea of Christ's suffering and death in terms of a theory of the human person. More specifically, I want to contrast two major theories of the person-body relation. One is dualism. Dualism is the view that a human person is composed of two substances, that is, a soul and a body, and he (strictly speaking) is identical with the soul. On the other hand, physicalism is the view that a human person is numerically identical with his biological body. In this paper, I argue that dualism is not successful in explaining Christ's passion for some reasons. Rather, physicalism, as I shall argue, provides a better explanation of how Christ's physical suffering and death are real just like everyone else's, so it is philosophically and theologically more plausible than dualism.

Dualist Views of the Passion of the Christ

There are two Christological theories dualists can choose.¹ On the first view, God the Son became a human soul when he was embodied. It says that Christ was composed of a human

¹ There are two kinds of substance dualism. One is Platonist dualism, according to which a soul has a body or it is related to a physical body in a certain causal relation just like a pilot in a ship. The other type of dualism is often called 'compound dualism,' according to which a person is a whole composed of a soul and a body. Augustine held this kind of dualism: "A man is not a body alone, nor a soul, but a being composed of both." (*City of God*, ch.24, par.2). Descartes arguably was a compound dualist too: "For these sensations of hunger, thirst, pain and so on are nothing but confused modes of thinking which arise from the union and, as it were, intermingling of the mind with the body." *Meditations VI*, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol.2, trans J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, and D. Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 56. The compound dualist says that two substances are united with each other, and eventually he is that soul in that the substantial soul is responsible for the person's mental life. For the purpose of this paper, I do not make a distinction between the traditional substance dualism and compound dualism. For a critique of compound dualism, see Eric Olson, "A Compound of Two Substances," in *Soul, Body, and Survival*, ed. Kevin Corcoran. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001). And a recent critique of dualism for the so-called 'paring problem,' see Jaegwon Kim, "Lonely Souls: Causality and Substance Dualism," in the same volume.

soul and a human body. I will call this view the human soul view (HSV). On the second view, in the Incarnation, God the Son's divine soul took the place of a human soul. That is, Christ was composed of a divine soul and a human body, and the divine soul was the same soul before the Incarnation. I will call this view the divine soul view (DSV).

I first want to criticize DSV. The theory claims that Christ was a divine soul having a human body. But by definition and tradition, the divine soul cannot experience physical pain, and it cannot die.² Dualists could argue that Christ did suffer when a certain physical state of his body caused the divine soul to feel pain. But I would reply that whether there is a causal relation between the soul and its body does not matter. My point is whether the *divine soul* felt pain and died. If Christ, God the Son, was a divine soul, it is hard to understand what it is like that he suffered and died. So long as the soul was *divine*, as he was before the Incarnation, his pain and death could not be like ours. So DSV does not offer a good explanation of Jesus' suffering and death.³

A more popular dualist Christology is HSV. According to HSV, Jesus' psychological nature as well as his physical nature was entirely human. It seems to explain how his suffering and death were real just like any other human beings' given that the dualist view of the human person is right. So HSV seems to provide a good explanation of Christ's humanity and his physical suffering.

² According to Christian tradition, God is divinely impassible. That is to say, God does not change or suffer. Events in the world cannot affect God in any way. If this tradition is right, DSV is untenable, if it says that Jesus, God the Son, suffered and died. If the divine soul suffered and died, soul was not divine according to that tradition. Perhaps liberation theologians and supporters of open theism would deny the Christian tradition. Discussion of such theories is beyond the scope of the purpose of this paper, so I hope I will discuss them in another place.

³ DSV was condemned as a heretical idea (called Apollinarianism) at the First Council of Constantinople in 381.

Although this view seems attractive for that reason, it is not a good Christological theory. It is worth noting that the orthodox doctrine of the Incarnation says that Christ had two natures in one person.⁴ On the orthodox doctrine, Christ was fully divine and fully human. Now HSV says that God the Son became a human soul and had a human body, so he was fully human. But on this view, where is Christ's divinity? HSV, as I shall argue, cannot answer the question.

On dualism, a human person's *essence* not only contains but *is* soul.⁵ That is, what makes a being a human person is a human soul; if something has a human soul, it is essentially a human person. If a human person did not have a soul, he could not exist, since according to dualism, he is that soul; he is numerically identical to the soul. With this in mind, let's look at the current dualist Christology. If God the Son became a human soul, he was fully human. But it appears hard to say that he was fully divine as well, since by becoming a *human* soul he, HSV must say, lost his essential properties for being divine. On HSV, Christ was a divine soul before the Incarnation, but he became a human being by becoming a human soul. Obviously, a human soul is qualitatively different from a divine soul. So if God the Son became a human soul, he

⁴ So the Definition of Chalcedon says:

“[O]ne and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only begotten, recognized in two natures, without confusion, without division, without separation; the distinction of natures being in no way annulled by the union, but rather the characteristics of each nature being preserved and coming together to form one person and subsistence, not as parted or separated into two persons, but one and the same Son and Only-begotten God the Word, Lord Jesus Christ.”⁴ (The Definition of Chalcedon)

The Definition says there was integrity of the two natures in the Incarnation while explaining the unity of the natures as a union in one “person.” It suggests three conditions of orthodox Christology:

1. Christ was fully divine.
2. Christ was fully human.
3. Christ had two natures in one person.

For the Definition and an explanation of it, see *Documents of the Christian Church*, ed. Henry Bettenson and Chris Maunder (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 56, and Linwood Urban, *A Short History of Christian Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 76 and 93.

⁵ Cf. Peter van Inwagen, *Material Beings* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 121.

must have been a totally different being. That is, HSV must say that Christ was merely a human being, not a divine being, since a human soul cannot essentially be divine. By losing divinity of his original soul, he lost the divine attributes he had before the Incarnation.⁶ Thus, although HSV seems successful in explaining Jesus' real suffering, it has a trouble with the issue of Christ's divinity.

So the dualist Christology has a dilemma. If it says that God the Son was incarnated by becoming a human soul (HSV), then it cannot explain his divinity. But if it says that he was a divine soul (DSV), it must admit that he was not fully human so he could not experience any pain.

A Physicalist View of the Passion of the Christ

If dualism is not successful, we need to seriously consider physicalism. Physicalism in this paper is about metaphysics of the human person. The basic idea of the theory, as some philosophers have recently argued, is that a human person just is his body.⁷ That is, he is identical with a living human organism. An important advantage of physicalism is that it can avoid an absurd consequence of a human person. For example, if I am not identical with my body, it seems that I coincide with something distinct (my body) from myself. That is, there are two distinct objects that occupy exactly the same region of space at the same time. But this appears absurd. If I am numerically identical with my body, there is no such absurdity. Similarly, I am the subject of certain mental states, and the physicalist says that my whole body is

⁶ So HSV naturally leads to the kenosis theory, according to which when God the Son became incarnated he lost some of his divine properties such as omnipotence and omniscience. I will discuss the theory in the final section.

⁷ I adopted 'physicalism' in Peter van Inwagen, *Metaphysics*, 2nd ed. (Boulder: Westview Press, 2002), Chapter 10. Trenton Merricks uses the same terminology in "The Word Made Flesh: Dualism, Physicalism, and the Incarnation," in *Persons: Human and Divine*, eds. Peter Van Inwagen and Dean Zimmerman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). Eric Olson uses a different term, 'animalism' for the same view in his *The Human Animal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

that subject in virtue of its brain and nervous system. But if I am not my whole body, then it appears that there are two distinct objects that have the same thoughts and feelings. This seems absurd too. This absurdity can be avoided by maintaining that I am my body.⁸

It is worth noting that although physicalism of the human person says that a person does not have a soul as a substantial part, it is consistent with the view that all the properties a human person has are not physical properties in that his mental properties are *sui generis*. I believe that although certain atoms of my brain play a role in producing thoughts, my thoughts are not reducible to those atoms. There are at least two reasons for this belief. First, one simple, unified state or act, like thinking, cannot be divisible into lots of physical parts; thinking cannot just be many nonthinking atoms. Further, there is an explanatory gap between mental properties and physical properties; the truth of the sentence 'I feel pain' is not guaranteed by the sentence 'C-fibers fire.'⁹ So we cannot account for the act of thought in terms of the activities of parts of the brain. Obviously, physicalism of the human person is not incompatible with these two ideas. It does not say that mental properties are merely physical things. Rather physicalism can imply that although atoms of the brain jointly produce a simple and unified act of thought, the mental

⁸ I assume that coincidence of two objects is not possible. But some philosophers argue that it is possible that there are two distinct objects at the same region of space at the same time, and one is composed or constituted by the other one. On this view, a human person is not identical with his body, and the former is coincident with the latter; he is constituted by his body. For the defense of the so-called colocationism or the constitution view, see Lynne Baker, *Persons and Bodies: A Constitution View* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), and E. J. Lowe, *Subjects of Experience* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), chapter 2. For a critique of the constitution view in philosophy of religion, see Dean Zimmerman, "Christians Should Affirm Mind-Body Dualism," in *Contemporary Debates in the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Michael Peterson and Raymond VanArragon (Malden: Blackwell, 2003). I think that colocationism cannot explain the passion of Christ for following reason. According to the theory, a human person is not identical with his body but something distinct from it. Now suppose that someone pinched Christ. Colocationists must say that the two objects, that is, Christ the person and his body, were pinched by someone. But if Christ was something distinct from his body, then he could not feel pain when he was pinched. This is not biblical. If colocationists reply that Christ felt pain because his body was pinched, this admits that Christ was identical with his body, but this is what colocationism rejects.

⁹ For the explanatory gap argument, see Joseph Levine, "Materialism and Qualia," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 64 (1986): 354-361.

property is not reducible to the nonthinking parts. Thus, physicalism does not necessarily imply type-type identity or logical supervenience or any other reductionist idea. So on the physicalist view, a human person is a living organism having irreducible mental properties.

The doctrine of the Incarnation can be explained in terms of physicalism of the human person. On this view, that God the Son became a human being means that he became a living human organism having sui generis mental properties. Of course, this does not mean that Christ was merely a human being. Necessarily, if Jesus was God the Son, he was God the Son even after he was incarnated. Then it is logically possible that although he became a material object like a living organism, he did have essential properties as God the Son. That is, he possessed properties that make him God the Son in this world (I will argue for this in more detail in the next section). It is hard to enumerate every essential property of God the Son, and this is not a main topic of this paper. We can simply think of some representative properties of God such as omnipotence and omniscience. Since Jesus was God the Son, he had properties of omnipotence and omniscience. Thus, in this actual world where he was walking and living almost 2000 years ago, he still was God the Son because of those essential properties, although he did not have an immaterial part.¹⁰ So the physicalist Christology explains two natures in one person. Christ was fully divine because he possessed essential properties as God the Son. He also was fully human because he was a living human organism.

Moreover, the physicalist Christology provides a more plausible view of Jesus' real suffering and death than dualism. As we have discussed above, dualism has a dilemma regarding Christ's suffering and death. But the physicalist view does not have such a problem. On this view, Christ was feeling pain when his body was hurt. He died when biological functions of his

¹⁰ Obviously, being immaterial is not an essential property of God the Son, although it may be essential to God the Father and God the Spirit. God the Son certainly had physical properties so he was not purely immaterial in this world.

body ceased to work. Since he and his body are one and the same thing, it is to be said that anything true of him is true of that body.

In my view, the physicalist view of the passion of the Christ is contrasted to dualism the most in the following sense. Dualism must say that Christ could not die, since he was a soul that cannot essentially die. So dualists must say that God the Son cannot die. On the other hand, physicalism accepts that he can. If Jesus' suffering and death were real, and that he was God the Son, then given physicalism, the incarnate God suffered and died. This idea could be shocking to some Christians, but this is a logical conclusion of the identity statement (Jesus *is* God the Son), and what the Bible tells us.¹¹ The dualist view, whether it is HSV or DSV, cannot capture that idea, since it must say that God the Son was alive even after the Crucifixion. Thus, given dualism, it is very hard to make sense of the death of God the Son. Moreover, if God the Son were alive after the Crucifixion, it would be hard to see why his resurrection is very important. For the resurrection in the Bible and Christian tradition means the resurrection of the dead body.

¹² But if Christ is identical with his body, this shows why the resurrection is a big deal. All things considered, physicalism is philosophically and theologically more plausible than dualism.¹³

¹¹ Some could claim that it is hard to understand God the Son died, since he was a divine being, that is, God. So physicalism, according to them, is wrong. I agree that God as the divine spirit cannot die. However, this does not apply to Christ. Again, by assumption he was fully human and fully divine. Because of his full humanity, it was possible that he died. Certainly, he was a divine being, but he was not a spirit after the Incarnation. So we should not say that the divine spirit was crucified and died. Rather we should say that a divine being who became a human person physically suffered and died.

¹² i.e., The Apostle's Creed says "I believe in the resurrection of the body." Similarly, the Nicene Creed says "I look for the resurrection of the dead."

¹³ My view is consistent with Martin Luther's "theology of the cross," according to which "Christ is God and a human being in one person because whatever is said about him as a human being must also be said of him as God, namely, "Christ has died," and, as Christ is God, it follows that "God has died" – not God in isolation, but God united with humanity." Cited from *The Christian Theology Reader*, 2nd ed. Ed., Alister McGrath (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001), 281. Tertullian, an early Church Father, held that everything, including God and the human soul, is corporeal. See Raymond Martin and John Barresi, "Introduction," in *Personal Identity*, ed. Martin and John Barresi (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), 12. If this is right, when Jesus died, his human soul died too. By appealing to this idea, HSV could explain Christ's death. But I think this kind of

Objection and Reply

Objection: Suppose for *reductio* that the physicalist view of the passion of the Christ is true. On the physicalist view, a human person is identical with his body, and he does not have a substantial soul. If so, God the Son became a human being by being identical with a human organism. He did not have a substantial soul. Now that he was fully human by becoming a human body, he must have possessed essential properties of human beings. Then he must have been mortal; for every physical body (a human person given physicalism) essentially is mortal. Besides, material objects cannot be omnipotent or omniscient so Jesus must have lacked such divine properties. If so, we have a strange idea that God the Son was mortal, and that he was not omnipotent and omniscient. So the physicalist Christology is wrong according to traditional Christian theism.

Reply: The assumption of this objection is that a living organism cannot have divine attributes, since being physical and being divine are contradictory. This assumption, however, is misleading. It is similar to a Platonic view, according to which something spiritual is good and something physical is evil and corrupted, so the Holy God cannot become a human body. I do not want to buy such a Platonic view, because it is not biblical (The Bible does not say that something physical is essentially bad. Note that God created the physical world and said that it was good). In a similar vein, I want to argue that it is not unbiblical and logically impossible that a material object like a human person has divine attributes. But this applies only to Christ, because before the Incarnation, he already was God the Son; God cannot lose his divinity since he

dualism is radical and not a dualist view in a traditional sense. I am not sure how dualists can explain that a soul is corporeal.

is essentially divine.¹⁴ Thus, even though he became a human organism, this does not necessarily imply that he lost his divinity. It is worth noting that the Incarnation was an addition of human attributes to God the Son. So he was fully divine as well as fully human even though he was incarnated by becoming a human organism.¹⁵

I want to say more about the objection. Was Christ, a living human organism, omnipotent, omniscient and immortal for the period of the Incarnation? This question is two-fold. If the question asks whether he was *always* omnipotent and omniscient, and mortal, the answer is ‘no.’ Obviously, the Bible tells us that Jesus was sometimes not omnipotent, omniscient, and immortal (God the Son died on the cross, and as we have discussed above, physicalism does say that). But if the question asks whether he was *essentially* omnipotent, omniscient, and immortal even for the period of the Incarnation, I would answer, ‘yes.’ Even though Jesus was not always omnipotent, omniscient, and immortal, it does not follow, as I shall explain below, that he lost such properties that are essential to God.¹⁶

¹⁴ Another reply says that that lacking maximal power or maximal knowledge is not an essential property to be a human being, although it is common to all human beings. Being common does not imply being essential. That is, it is possible that a human being is omnipotent and omniscient. This is very attractive but not successful. For a human being is necessarily a creature in every possible world he exists, and then he is not powerful to create himself. For the strategy, see Thomas Senor, “The Incarnation and the Trinity,” in *Reason for the Hope Within*, ed., Michael Murray (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 248-249.

¹⁵ HSV cannot say the same thing. On HSV, a human person is essentially a human soul, and God the Son became a human person by becoming a human soul. But a human soul is essentially a human soul so it is necessary that it cannot be divine. But in the case of God the Son’s becoming a material object like a living human organism, there is no reason to think that such a being cannot essentially be divine or loses his divinity. Physicality, unlike having a property of being a human soul, is neutral with being divine and being not-divine, so it is possible that the property does not hurt God the Son’s divinity.

¹⁶ Some philosophers suggest the “two minds view,” according to which Christ had two minds, one divine and one human. It says that the divine mind is omniscient, whereas the human mind is not. The divine mind is omnipotent while the human mind is not. But I am not convinced by this theory for the reason of a schizophrenic Jesus. It is hard to understand the existence of two consciousnesses in one person. Besides, it is unclear how a mind is omnipotent. But for a defense of the “two minds view” of the Incarnation, see Thomas Morris, *The Logic of God Incarnate* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), chapter 6.

I believe that even though God the Son became a material object, he still had properties essential to God. This, some could say, is contradictory to the view that God the Son did not know some truth (i.e., the hour of his return) and that he physically suffered and died. How can we solve the contradiction? Some could argue that to solve the problem, physicalism should be connected to the kenosis theory, according to which God the Son abandoned some of his divine properties in order to become incarnated (Philippians 2:6-7). For example, when he became a living human organism, he laid aside omnipotence and omniscience while his moral properties (i.e. love and mercy) were maintained. But I am not convinced by the kenosis theory for a simple reason. If God is essentially omnipotent and omniscient, then he would not be divine any more if he did not have such divine properties. God cannot give up his divine properties that he essentially has. If God is necessarily omnipotent and omniscient, it is impossible that God does not have such properties in any possible world. Thus, the kenosis theory is wrong.¹⁷ Again, the Incarnation was not a subtraction from his divine natures but an addition of human natures.

If the kenosis theory is wrong, how should the physicalist understand his divine attributes during his earthly life? For example, if Christ was essentially omnipotent, how could he not avoid his suffering and death? I think his omnipotence does not imply that he could do whatever he wanted to do during the period of the Incarnation. Note that he was fully human. Physicalists must admit that since he took on human natures, he had limitations on functioning omnipotence. But such limitations did not result from the loss of omnipotence. Rather he *voluntarily* decided not to use all of his power by taking on some human natures. Thus, the limitation was not a result of the loss of his divinity. Think about this analogy. Suppose that Tiger Woods, the world's greatest golfer, voluntarily covers up one of his eyes and plays a golf

¹⁷ Some theologians argue that the kenosis theory is based on a wrong interpretation of Philippians 2:6-7. They say that what God the Son emptied himself of was not divine properties but the glory he had as God. This interpretation claims that Jesus emptied himself in order to become functionally subordinated to the Father for the period of Incarnation. See Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 751.

game. In that situation, he cannot fully perform his great golf skill since he had a limitation on his ability. But it is hard to say that his ability is in essence diminished in that situation. Similarly, so long as God the Son voluntarily limited his power by taking some physical natures, it does not follow that his omnipotence was not in essence surrendered. Of course, Jesus sometimes used his power for some reason (i.e. to show his divine Sonship). Obviously, he could have avoided his suffering and death because he was omnipotent (as he told Paul) but he did not choose to avoid them. The problem of omniscience can be understood in the light of this idea too.

Likewise, the Incarnate Word was essentially immortal. The divine property of being immortal was not displaced by the property of being mortal. So it was possible that he became immortal in this world. But he voluntarily chose to die. He voluntarily accepted human mortality for some reason. But this does not imply that the property of being immortal was divested when he became incarnated.

In conclusion, although physicalism does say that God the Son died on the cross, it does not say that he died just because he abandoned some of his divine natures when he was incarnated. Rather it says that he still had all the divine properties during his period on earth and even on the cross, but he suffered and died because he rendered himself vulnerable to physical pains.*

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